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PEYOTE

by RUTH M. UNDERHILL, Denver.

PROBABLY most Americanists know something about the narcotic known to the Aztecs as peyotl and to the botanists as *Lophophora Williamsii*. It is a small cactus with a thick stem growing mostly underground and a head above ground looking much like one or more Brussels sprouts. It grows in northern Mexico and in a few places across the Rio Grande in the United States. It was used in ceremonies by the Aztec and by other north Mexican Indians of the same language group.

The best known peyote users were the Huichol, who made a forty-day pilgrimage to obtain it, gathered the plant with fasting and ceremony, then brought it back for a great mid-winter celebration which sanctified the deer and crops for the year. On this occasion an infusion of dried peyote was drunk. The drinkers enjoyed hallucinations for a several-day period, then used it no more until the next year.

In the late nineteenth century the Kiowa or the Apache, both wandering Plains tribes who raided into Mexico, introduced the narcotic to the United States. Several tribes claim the honour, but none admit that they learned about the vision-produced plant from a human source. The tale usually is that some escaping captive or wandering warrior was visited by the plant itself in human form, told of its powers for healing and for giving visions, and bidden to introduce a peyote ceremony. The one which has now become standard had nothing to do with any Mexican ceremony I know of. Instead, it was based on the old Kiowa ceremony of the sacred stones, where worshippers sat circle-wise in a *tipi* around a crescent-shaped earthen altar which held stones with spirit-power. The place of stones was taken by a giant or chief peyote button, but otherwise the features were common to the Plains, such as the use of white sage and cedar for purifying, the eagle feather fan, the drum, and the rattle. The songs sung were on the ancient Indian themes of air, earth, food, water. While each participant sang and rattled, another drummed, and dry or fresh peyote was passed around. People ate as many of the so-called buttons as they could, sometimes totalling forty or $\frac{1}{25}$ gramme in a night. While still remaining able to drum or sing, they obtained a state of euphoria, saw the whole scene in an aura of rainbow colours, and many had hallucinations of spirit-vision such as used to be obtained by ordeal and fasting.

No wonder that, among the Plains Indians, conquered, and apparently deserted by their spirit helpers, the peyote cult spread like wild-fire. It contained no element of hostility to the white conquerors but rather a withdrawal into old Indian ways. Christian missionaries had been among the Indians for a good many years, and many tribes made a synthesis between this new cult and Christianity. They accepted the Christian doctrine but explained that peyote had come to lead the Indians to God. I have heard them say: 'Peyote is the Indians' Christ. You white people needed a man to show you the way, but we Indians have always been friends with the plants and have understood them. So to us peyote came. And not to the whites.'

That last phrase is the keynote. To the people whose self-respect was gone, who felt lost and inferior, it was a healing belief that to them had come a message no white man could

understand. Over and over I have been told this fact and realized how the marginal groups among the Indians, those not yet adjusted to the new culture, cling to this prop for their racial importance.

In 1890 the American government, alarmed by reports of wholesale drug-taking, sent James A. Mooney, of the Smithsonian Institution, to investigate. He reported that the narcotic did not seem to be habit-forming, and that is the report of our physicians to the present day, a point to which I shall return. He also advised that the peyote users, if they wished to remain unmolested, should incorporate as the Native American Church. This they managed to do in the state of Iowa. They were unable to make their organization nation-wide, since some states include peyote among forbidden drugs, though the federal government does not. The Native American Church is growing, principally among those tribes which have not made a transition to modern ways of life. When they at last feel a desire for the automobiles, the houses, and the radios which they see other people have, they try to get them by entering the white man's economic world, and the resultant adjustment is painful. They seek frantically for new spiritual values, joining several evangelical sects all at the same time, and also turning to their own medicine men for some miracle. Often the best hope of spiritual solace they find is in the peyote cult. Deputations come to see the officials in states where they are organized, and there is a system of missionaries who go out to start branches. The organized church and its branches even voted at its last meeting to attempt some political influence by backing for office only those candidates who show interest in Indians.

I was impressed with the importance of peyote for perplexed and discouraged Indians when I took a field party to the Cheyenne-Arapaho, former buffalo hunters who have never adjusted themselves to the farm life which the government expected of them. I therefore went through the whole cycle of peyote use, from the ceremonial gathering to the ceremonial meeting when the plant heads are consumed. It is this modern version of peyote use which I wish to describe to you. I brought home a large quantity of the plant for study by our departments of botany, biochemistry, and psychology; and though the studies are not nearly finished, they add a little to what has already been worked out by experts in England, Germany, and America.

We have no account of peyote-gathering north of Mexico, so I located an old peyote priest, in his terms a 'road man' or leader on the peyote road. With him and two other ancients I drove some six hundred miles from Oklahoma to Texas, where the plant grows in the desert country bordering the Rio Grande. Its habitat is hot, gravelly ridges where the little grey cactus heads grow under the shade of other desert vegetation. The myth is that peyote never reveals itself until after the seekers have prayed, when it may appear in the form of a man or deer, leaving the plant behind. True enough, we at first saw no peyote. However, at the road man's direction we knelt, each smoked a corn-husk cigarette, the ancient form of incense, and he prayed: 'Nokaho'ose (peyote), we do not come here for a light or selfish purpose. We come to gather you for the good of our people, the old, the mature, and the young.'

This same sort of prayer was made by many Indian groups to plants and animals before plucking or killing them. Then each of us prayed in turn, and finally we laid our cigarette butts in a circle on the gravel as they are laid on the peyote altar at ceremonies. It is a fact that, almost invisible against the gravel, one of the men did see the little grey head of a peyote plant. We then gathered without further ceremony, each filling a feed sack three feet long and weighing about twenty pounds.

The next event was a ceremony; and though I have attended several, I will describe the particular one to which Sweezy took me. This was not a ceremony of the Native American Church, which meets officially only at Christmas, Easter, and our Independence day—4th July. This meeting had been sponsored by relatives of Sweezy's in order to heal a girl who was paralysed. The process was expensive, because, in the manner of the Sun-dance, the sponsor not only had to pay the peyote priest but to feed the assembled company. However, in this case most people brought offerings, and I tried to make myself popular with a side of beef.

We arrived in mid-afternoon at one of the unpainted frame houses which Indians are often content to occupy without furniture or attempt at improvement. These former nomads seem never to have accepted the idea that a house should be a home to be embellished or tended. They still spend the time and money on costumes and containers, but a house to them is only a temporary shelter. They cheerfully allow the windows to break and the boards to rot without any attempt at repair. However, the *tipi* for the ceremony stood outside, a huge conical structure made of canvas, not buffalo hide, but with bead embroidery of peyote symbols made by women who had this sacred right. The *tipi* belongs to the Native American Church but is borrowed by other groups without payment. Indians still consider lending or giving on request a public duty.

Wives of the twenty or so men concerned were busy preparing sleeping arrangements for some dozen babies and also food for next day. The men would fast until after the ceremony, and so did I and the girl who was to be cured. In the Arapaho tribe women do not attend the peyote ceremony but let their husbands obtain blessings for them in the usual Indian fashion. There are some tribes, however, where women take a prominent part.

I was much impressed when dusk began to fall and we who were to participate walked to the *tipi*. We stood in single file with the road man, not Sweezy on this occasion, at the head. I was beckoned to a place behind a young ex-soldier who spoke good enough English and who acted as my cicerone during the performance. As we stood waiting to enter, the priest prayed impromptu in the low voice Indians use for sacred utterances, explaining that we came reverently, with no evil thoughts and only asking to follow the right road and bring good to ourselves and others. Then we stooped and entered the *tipi*, moving clockwise around the wall to our seats. I need not describe at length the crescent-shaped earthen altar, the small fire of cedar logs in ritual arrangement, and the participants seated cross-legged with the road man at the west, facing the eastern door.

We began with the ceremony of corn-husk cigarettes, their butts finally laid against the altar. Then we incensed ourselves in the purifying cedar smoke, holding our hands to it, then drawing them over the face and down the body. Each person who left the *tipi* during the night must purify himself thus on his return. The leader began with a long prayer and explanation of the ceremony. He spoke in Arapaho, but quite often during the night he reverted to English. Members of five different tribes were present, and English was their only common language.

The peyote buttons, or small heads of the cactus, were passed in a paper bag, such a container having none of the grotesque effect to Indians that it would with us. We were bidden to take four ($_{200}$ gramme). These were fresh and juicy, and my ex-soldier neighbour told me to peel off the fuzz and outer skin. They tasted like quinine; and I may confess immediately that from the eight I consumed that night I got no visions. Most people had more.

The ceremony which followed was simple and repetitive. However, its very monotony

was impressive, as each person in turn sang four songs, of his own composition if possible. The man to the singers' right drummed in a staccato rhythm, while the singer shook a rattle. I confess that I passed my turn, though I had wondered whether something in plainsong would be appropriate.

At midnight came a special song. Water was brought in and we drank ceremonially out of a large galvanized-iron pail, then we went out to breathe for a few moments the cold November air. Then came the curing ceremony, when the leader, then each person in turn, made a prayer to the Christian God on behalf of the paralyzed girl, promising that if she regained her health she would devote herself to good works. Some of the prayers in English reminded me of the requests for healing made to Christ as reported in the New Testament.

These Indians, much as they need spiritual help, find it hard to accept many of the beliefs of Christianity. Ideas of sin, sacrifice, penance, and pardon are particularly repugnant to them, and therewith also the idea of the crucifixion. I have sometimes asked missionaries whether it would not be possible to omit that part of the Christian creed for the present and concentrate on the actual teachings of Christ as the model for Christian behaviour. They have usually replied that even if they themselves were willing to make such a change, their churches would not consent. It seemed to me that, in a rule of thumb way, the Indians had done that very thing, excising the ideas of sin and repentance and leaving that of brotherly love, with peyote as the illuminator.

After midnight came an experience meeting, when people testified to the marvelous cures worked by the plant. (Here I may interpolate that, many of today's ills being psychosomatic, peyote could cure these as well as an analyst.) Others testified only that they had gained satisfaction and peace through walking the peyote road. 'It is a hard road,' they said over and over again. 'The white people go to church and sit on a cushioned seat. We fast and freeze all night because we are willing to pay thus for visions.' I could agree that it was a hard road, for we had now been sitting for eight hours cross-legged on the ground, with a cold wind blowing on our backs under the edge of the *tipi*. As the hours passed on, and we listened to the singing and gazed steadily at the small fire, I felt there must be some hypnotic effect even without eating peyote. The statement of our botanists is that peyote in the small quantities eaten at these meetings produces anoxia whose result is a mild euphoria such as airmen feel before they black out. There is also a slight derangement of vision and hearing. At such a time the sense of brotherly communion and the belief that one is cured and on the right road are of the greatest help. One who feared the results or did not appreciate the communion might have an ugly experience, as some white investigators have done. Even without a belief in peyote, I was affected by the communion. After the dawn song, another drink of water, and a symbolic repast of old Indian foods, we crawled out into the November sunrise. I had received some rather cold looks when I appeared the night before as a stranger. Now the participants came up to me one by one, shook my hand white man's style, and said, 'Good morning, sister, are you happy?' After that night of companionship I answered quite truthfully, 'Yes, I am happy.'

The songs, like all Plains Indian songs, contain many meaningless syllables, and the few intelligible words are meant as keys to a thought, not a complete expression of it. The first four songs are addressed to Christ, God, the Great Spirit, or peyote. No name is mentioned.

I. Now we begin
I look to you.
Look down on me and these people.
Help us as we meet here.

II. Look to me. Poor me. Pity me.
Help me.
Help me to know the spirit way.

Those familiar with Plains Indian vision technique know that the call to the Sun or other spirits was usually for pity.

III. Heavenly Father, save me.
Give me gladness, happy feel. (*Not a whole sentence.*)

IV. I am going your road.
I am following it.
Give me your mind.

The four midnight songs say:

I. Father, give me a holy thing.
Life . . . to serve. (*Again not a whole sentence.*)

II. Now it is midnight.

III. Now we take water.
Bless it so that it opens our mind.

IV. We take water.
Bless it so that everything shall be renewed.

Dawn songs:

I. Now morning, daylight.
A good thing is coming.

II. Happy. Glad.

Some of the songs composed by individuals said:

Jesus God,
Only one,
Pity me
Pity me.
Those birds up in the sky are watching us
Because they have mercy on us.

Sweezy said that some Indians think of this as meaning actual birds imbued with spirit-power in the Old Indian sense. Others take them to be angels. Peyote, it is obvious, gives a

wide range of belief, and its real unifying factor is that it is Indian, something for the Red Man alone and which the white can share only with his permission.

I was earnestly prayed for when I left the desert country with my twenty pounds of peyote. These I distributed to the departments in our university dealing with botany, biochemistry, and psychology. A good deal has already been written on these aspects of the narcotic, with the biochemical the least developed. I am not qualified to report on our studies in that line which are still in progress. However, for those who are as little acquainted with the subject as myself, I can report that peyote contains eight alkaloids, some stimulants and some depressants. The most important is mescaline, an aromatic amine closely related to tyrosine. About tyrosine it is known that too much may produce schizophrenia and that smaller amounts produce raised blood-pressure, nausea, and a fright-fight reaction. Smaller amounts still mean a lack of oxygen for the brain as at high altitudes. The drug has never caused death to human beings or rabbits, though it has to dogs. It is therefore with rabbits that our workers will continue their studies. They intend to work with mescaline and not with peyote, which contains very little of it—$\frac{1}{10}$ gramme to a hundred buttons. The Indians at a meeting usually take eight buttons or $\frac{1}{200}$ gramme. Even the greatest peyote user never boasts of more than thirty, or $\frac{1}{33}$ gramme, while white experimenters with mescaline have taken eight whole grammes.

Peyote, therefore, cannot be the drug menace that our officials have feared. In fact, I have sometimes thought that, given the same emotional significance, a potato would do as well. What matters is the sense of racial importance derived from a religion all the Indian's own. We find the peyote cult flourishing and spreading among those tribes which are in a transition state. Even there it is not popular with young people who are adjusted to modern economic life. It gives solace to the older ones or to those who have tried the modern world and have not been able to adjust themselves to such foreign traits as regular work hours and the demand for individual initiative. Such marginal men can find self-respect and comfort in peyote, the Indian Christ.

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